

THE LEAD MINES OF AUSTINVILLE

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Big Stone Gap, Va.

Col. John Chiswell was an officer in the British Army, and a native of Wales. In the 1750s Chiswell was running an iron ore mine near Fredericksburg, Virginia. Prior to 1756 he was exploring the New River Valley in the area of present Austinville where, by tradition, he was hiding in a cave to escape pursuing Indians when he discovered lead/zinc ore in the dolomite rock. Chiswell was a metallurgist, and recognized what he had discovered. In 1756 Chiswell, in conjunction with Col. William Byrd III, opened up a lead mines (always referred to in the plural) at present Austinville. It is curious that no grant or deed was issued for this land at this time.

The status of the lead mines became complicated in 1758 due to the outbreak of the French and Indian War (1754-63). The Commonwealth of Virginia felt obliged to make a treaty with the Cherokee, who had a dubious title to the land since their conquest of the Yuchi (primary home was Saltville), and Catawbias (primarily of the Yadkin Valley of North Carolina). The Cherokee's real hard-core territory ended near Knoxville, Tennessee, but to placate their pretensions to ownership of the New River Valley, which was also claimed by the Shawnee (primary home Southern Ohio), the Commonwealth of Virginia signed a treaty with the Cherokee that guaranteed no development of the New River Valley. Chiswell recruited miners from Wales to come work the Austinville works, which were commonly called the "Welsh Mines". It is confusing whether or not the mines operated during this phase, as there was a law suit brought by the Welch against the mine operators for not honoring their employment contract.

History seemed to swirl around the lead mines. Due to the above-mentioned treaty with the Cherokee of approximately 1758, the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Colony of South Carolina jointly built Fort Loudon on the Little Tennessee River a few miles southeast of Knoxville, Tennessee. The Cherokee soon laid siege to the fort, which was garrisoned by the South Carolina militia. The Commonwealth of Virginia commissioned a relief force commanded by Col. William Byrd III, and he began a desultory march down the Valley of Virginia toward that end.

Byrd was obsessed with protecting his line of supply, and built forts along his route of passage. On the main road down the Great Valley of Virginia at the point nearest to the lead mines at Austinville he built a fort he named after his good friend Chiswell. He planned to build his next fort at the Long Island of the Holston, and to allow passage of his wagon train he constructed the military road known to this day

as the “Island Road”. His fort at Long Island he named after another partner of his and Chiswell’s, John Robinson, Chiswell’s brother-in-law.

The Treaty of Paris that ended the French and Indian War in 1763 required the British to withdraw all the settlements to the west bank of the New River. This boundary was referred to as the Line of Demarcation. This placed the lead mines, which are located on the western bank of the New River, in legal limbo. No land grant was issued for the mines, which at some point were abandoned.

Indeed, the Virginia settlements at this time already extended into East Tennessee. Many of the settlers refused to leave. The Line of Demarcation became a major cause of Virginia’s joining the Revolutionary movement. The Lead Mines at the time of the French and Indian war were on the west bank of the New River. The vein of ore extended under the river and onto the eastern bank. In order to expose more ore, the mined zone on the western bank was gradually extended under the river to the point that the river was purposefully rerouted with a loop to the west (at this small segment of the river this is actually the northern shore). By looking at a modern map, unless one knows this, it is not obvious that the original mines were on the western (northern) shore. Most of the mine spoils are now on the eastern bank.



THE LEAD MINES SITE AS OF 2020

The situation at the lead minds became even cloudier in 1766 when Chiswell became involved in a tavern room drunken brawl with a Mr. Rutledge, with the end result being that Mr. Rutledge was run through by Col. Chiswell’s sword, and died. Col. Chiswell was taken to Williamsburg, where he was placed in jail. He was bailed out, went home, and committed suicide.

The Treaty of Paris gradually began to be ignored, and the lands west of the New River began to be resettled. At some unknown time the Lead Mines reopened.

In 1775 the Lead Mines were the county seat of Fincastle County, and as such was chosen as the site for the meeting of the regional Committee of Safety that had been called for by the First Continental Congress. As a result fifteen prominent men were chosen, and they drafted the "Fincastle Resolutions", which was the first document calling for "liberty or death" and a violent revolution against Great Britain.

At about this time the supplies of wood in the area had been exhausted by the demands of the lead mines for charcoal for the smelting of the ore. The county seat had to be moved to Fincastle so that the population could have access to firewood.

With the start of the Revolutionary War the Commonwealth of Virginia's Committee of Safety for Fincastle County assumed operating responsibility for the lead mines, under the direct supervision of Col. Charles Lynch of the Bedford County Militia. The mines were worked by slaves, and became a very important source of lead for the revolutionary armies during the war.

The lead mines being as important as they were to the revolutionary cause, Tories made attempts to capture or to incapacitate them. The most aggressive plan that the Tories developed was to capture the iron works at Lynchburg, the Lead Mines at Austinville, and to free the British and German prisoners of war at Charlottesville. Lynch was very vigorous and suppressing these activities, and he hanged a number of Tories without benefit of due process. In this manner the American English language gained a new verb, "to lynch."

The lead mines were visited by several famous people, including Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Lewis, and Daniel Boone.

Moses Austin of Connecticut married Mary Brown who was of a family that owned iron mines in Virginia. What connection his wife may have had to the Chiswell family is unknown. At any event, in 1789 Austin used the Lead Mines as the basis for his successful bid to put a lead roof on the State Capital building. In 1791 he and his family moved to Austinville, which was named after him.

The Commonwealth of Virginia in 1790 sold the land mines at auction to the Austin brothers, Moses and Stephen. They were not issued a land grant for the mines, however. Interestingly, Moses' named his son after his brother, Stephen, and he was the Stephen F. Austin who became known as the "Father of Texas."

The Austins went on an aggressive business expansion, and are credited with having started the lead industry in America. However, they could not sustain their enterprises, and in 1791 the Commonwealth of Virginia granted to Charles Lynch (LO 24-151) 1400 acres, which included the lead mines. The body of the grant stated that Lynch "held this property in trust for the Lead Mine Company". This was the first time that the legal status of the Lead Mines was established.



**LAND GRANT LO 24-151 OF
1400 ACRES TO CHARLES
LYNCH CONTAINING THE
AUSTINVILLE LEAD MINES
MAY 27, 1791**

NOTE THAT THIS ORIGINAL GRANT DOES NOT INCLUDE THE HISTORIC MINES SITE TO THE NORTHEASTERN CORNER, LEAVING A MYSTERY OF ITS LEGAL ORIGINS

During the Civil War, the lead mines again became the major source of lead for the Confederacy. Lead pigs were hauled by wagons to the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad at Max Meadows, and were delivered to the ammunition factories at Richmond, Knoxville, and Chattanooga. The shot tower continued to be used to make round lead shot. Three and a half million pounds of lead were produced for the Confederacy by the Austinville mines during the war by slave labor. This was one third of the total used by the Confederacy.

In 1863 Union forces under Col. John Toland left Charleston, West Virginia with intent to destroy the Saltville salt works, the Virginia Tennessee Railroad, and the Austinville Lead Mines. Confederate Home Guardsmen ambushed the Union

forces within the streets of Wythville, and Toland and many of his staff were killed. While the Union won the battle, the Union forces retreated without attaining any of their objectives.

In May 1864 Union General George Crook was dispatched from West Virginia to destroy the Saltville salt works, the “long bridge” of the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad at Radford, and to destroy the Lead Mines. Crook first moved against Saltville, but when he learned that it was defended by Confederate General John Hunt Morgan he lost his enthusiasm for that part of his assignment, and moved toward the long bridge and the Lead Mines. Morgan came after Crook and whipped him severely, and the Union forces retreated to West Virginia.

In December of 1864 Grant had Lee surrounded in Petersburg, with the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad being Lee’s life line. Grant sent General George Stoneman from Knoxville to attain the customary objectives in Southwest Virginia. He bypassed Saltville, and destroyed the railroad as he came up its roadbed. When his forces attacked the Lead Mines, the Confederates abandoned them without a fight. The Lead Mines and all their associated facilities were burned.

During his withdrawal back to Knoxville, Stoneman destroyed the Saltville saltworks.

By March 1865 the Lead Mines were back in production, but Lee surrendered in April. Two days earlier, the Federals again destroyed the Lead Mine Works.

After the Civil War the lead mines began to run out of rights to minable ore. A clerk who worked there, George Lafayette Carter, saw his opportunity, and bought mineral rights to the surrounding farms. When the owners of the mines woke up, and decided to buy this land, they had to deal with their clerk, who made himself immensely wealthy by this process. He then bought up bankrupt iron works in the New River Valley, and by good management brought them into a state of profitability. He then took his money and developed the iron, coal, and railroad businesses of Wise County. Most notable of these businesses was the Virginia Iron and Coal Company, and the Carolina, Clinchfield, and Ohio Railroad (the Clinchfield).

The Lead Mines were actively worked until mid-Twentieth Century. The entire area is now part of the New River State Park.

1620 Act
Montgomery
Examine

Charles Lynch Beverly Randolph Esquire Governor of the Common-
wealth of Virginia To all to whom these presents shall
come Greeting Knowe that by virtue and in consideration
of part of his precept in Treasury Warrants Number two
thousand three hundred and seven by three. & two thou-
sand three hundred and fifty six, and in consideration
of the several Compositions of three pounds ten shillings
Sterling paid by Charles Lynch in Wth the Treasury of this
Dominion wth; There is granted by the said Common wth
unto the said Charles Lynch in trust for the Sea Mines
Company, a certain tract or parcel of Land containing
seven Hundred Acres by Survey bearing date the first day of
October one thousand seven hundred and eighty nine, lying
and being in the County of Montgomery on the North or East
side of New River including the Sea Mines of bounded as
followeth, to wit, Beginning at two white oaks on a High
Steep Bank of the River

(452)

East one hundred poles to two white oaks, North thirty
 seven degrees East ninety five poles to a white oak and
 hickory Saplings on Benjamin's Branch, & up said branch
 one hundred and eighty poles to a Spanish oak, South
 twenty degrees West two hundred poles to a Black oak on
 a high Ridge, South nineteen degrees East seventy six poles
 to a white oak, South five degrees East forty six poles to a
 large white oak, South twenty six degrees West forty six poles
 to a white oak sapling near to an old Survey, & with the
 line thereof, North thirty six degrees West one hundred
 and sixty poles to a white oak, South fifty three degrees
 West two hundred and ten poles to two black oaks, then
 leaving said line North fifty three degrees West twenty two
 poles to two white oaks by a Spring, South fifty three
 degrees West twenty two poles, South thirty two degrees East
 two hundred and fifty poles to four Chestnut trees, South
 forty degrees West seventy two poles to two Black oaks
 North thirty two degrees West eighty poles to a white oak
 and black oak saplings, North sixty three degrees West
 eighty eight to three white oak Saplings, North seventy
 one degrees West one hundred and thirty two poles to a
 white oak and two black oak Saplings, North twenty degrees
 West seventy eight poles to three white oaks, North twenty
 degrees West one hundred and forty poles to a Walnut
 and white oak stump, North fifteen degrees East thirty
 six poles to the River at the mouth of a gully and
 down the River the several Courses thereof seven
 hundred poles to the Beginning, With its Appurtenances
 as To Have and to hold the said tract or parcel of

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Lead with its appurtenances to the said Charles Lynch as
head for the Lead Mine Company as aforesaid, and has been
for ever. In Witness whereof the said Rowley Randolph
Esquire Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia hath
hereunto set his hand and caused the liden seal of
the said Commonwealth to be affixed on the twenty seventh
day of May in the year of Lord one thousand seven hundred
and seventy one. and of the Commonwealth the fiftieth
Rowley Randolph

LO 24-151 PAGE #3

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